

Words that make Women DISAPPEAR

Article by Alma Graham, reprinted with permission from Redbook Magazine, March 1977.

Published by the Ontario Status of Women Council, 700 Bay street, 3rd Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1Z6 (416) 965-1111

The Ontario Status of Women Council thinks language is important. Sex stereotyping is deeply engrained in our day-to-day language. And while there are those who scoff and make poor jokes about "personhole covers", the OSWC views the misuse of language as a major obstacle in the attainment of total equality for women. If, as children grow older, they hear only of policemen then they learn to think of police officers in male terms. Society assigns roles to its members through language - we are what people say we are!

All of us must develop a greater awareness of the implications of sexist language in all forms of communication.

DEPOSITORY LIBRARY MATERIAL

What is sexist language? It's language that excludes women or gives unequal treatment to women and men. It's language that tells a woman she is two things. She is a man and she is not a man. If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is "Man overboard!" If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is "manslaughter". But if she encounters visible or invisible signs that say "Man Wanted" or "Men Only" (under Ontario human rights, visible signs give her the legal right to complain)- she knows that the exclusion does not apply to plants or animals or inanimate objects but to female human beings.

While watching a film in nursery school on primitive people, a three-year-old girl was told that "man invented tools" and "man discovered fire". Later she asked her mother, "Mommy, weren't there any women in those days?"

A very good question, and one that prompted her mother to do some thinking about just how unfair to women the English language is. After all, if all human beings are consistently referred to as "men", then a woman is automatically denied equal status.

And in employment practices, only in recent years has an effort been made to eliminate sexist labels from job titles. Newspapers now have changed their job listings from the segregated "Help Wanted - Male" and "Help Wanted - Female" to a single, nonsegregated list.

Yet gender-free job titles can make a difference. When the Los Angeles City Council approved a plan to abolish the titles of "policeman" and "policewoman", replacing them with the classification police officer, women on the force became eligible for promotions to ranks for which they had been ineligible in the past.

As the little girl in nursery school noticed, "man" is one of the most overworked nouns in the English language. It is used to mean a person, worker, member, agent, candidate, representative, voter, even astronaut. Consider the legislator. He is a man of the people. To prove that he's the best man for the job, he takes his case to the man in the street. He is champion of the working man. He speaks up for the little man. He remembers the forgotten man. And he believes in the principle "One man, one vote".

If we agree to stop overworking the word "man", what other words are we going to use in its place? The cardinal rule is simple: Be inclusive. When referring to the human species, we can say people, human beings or men and women. For "mankind" we can substitute humankind, humanity or the human race. "Primitive man" can be changed to primitive people; "pre-historic men" can become pre-historic human beings; "man's conquest of space" can be the human conquest of space.

Where job titles are concerned, the major rule is: Be specific. Name the occupation by the work performed, not by the gender of the worker. "Mailmen", "firemen" and "cameramen" are mail carriers, fire fighters and camera operators. A "workman" is a worker, a "newsman" is a reporter, a "foreman" is a supervisor and a "watchman" is a guard.

Whether a male or a female does the job shouldn't affect its title. Instead of saying "steward" and "stewardess", we should use the inclusive term flight attendant; and instead of saying "maid" or "janitor", we can specify whether we want a house or office cleaner or a building superintendent or custodian.

But the pronoun is the real problem. How do we avoid referring to the unknown singular subject as "he"? Our language needs a common pronoun but none of the various ones suggested has yet shown signs of gaining acceptance. The likeliest candidate is already in the language, at least on the level of informal speech. This is the quasi-singular "they", as in "Everybody will wear what they want to wear". Often you can reword a sentence to avoid singular pronouns altogether. Thus, instead of saying, "If the student practices this exercise, he can learn it", you can say, "If students practice this exercise, they can learn it". Finally, once we have included both females and males in our language, we should remember to treat them equally. Instead of saying: "Henry Harris is an up-and-coming lawyer and his wife Ann is a striking brunette", we might say either: "The Harrises are an attractive couple. Henry is a handsome blond and Ann is a striking brunette", or "The Harrises are highly respected in their fields. Ann is an accomplished musician and Henry is an up-and-coming lawyer".

Equal treatment also should be accorded women of achievement. Consider a headline that appeared a few years ago: "Writer's Wife Becomes Mayor". This "wife" had been the first woman ever elected to the local City Council but even when she became mayor she remained a "writer's wife".

In 1976 the New York Times updated its Manual of Style and Usage, cautioning writers that "in referring to women we should avoid words or phrases that seem to imply that the Times speaks with a purely masculine voice". But despite this resolve a front page story that same year, reporting on a study of retirement income, cited statistics on a "married retiree and his wife" - without any indication that some married retirees might have husbands!

Wives. Ladies. Girls. A man's property. Someone fragile and polite. An innocent. Not only has a woman been defined as something less than a lady and something more than a girl; she has been called fickle and foolish, silly and superficial and, above all, weak. In our language the qualities of the adult - strength, courage, will, wisdom and self-reliance - have been given exclusively to the male. Thus it is no wonder that until recently the word "woman" was avoided as though it were something bad to be and that "girl" is like calling a Black man a "boy" - it makes the adult unimportant and immature.

Now increasing numbers of women are showing a new pride in their adulthood. They do not like to be called "honey" or "dear" by male grocers or bank tellers who hardly know them. They do not like to be called an "old maid" if they're single or a "housewife" if they're not. They are not "girls", "gals", "wives", "ladies" or "the fair sex". They are women - and beginning to be happy about the fact.

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE THE
PERMISSION OF THE ONTARIO
STATUS OF WOMEN COUNCIL TO
REPRINT THIS ARTICLE IN ITS
ENTIRETY - UNCHANGED - FOR
WIDER DISTRIBUTION.